

VZCZCXRO7326
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHNH
DE RUEHHM #0951/01 2570610
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 140610Z SEP 07
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3108
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 2175
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 3316

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 000951

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF AND PRM/A

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PREF](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN CENTRAL
HIGHLANDS GIA LAI PROVINCE

REF: REF A: HCMC 880 REF B: HANOI 1128 C: HCMC 811 D: HCMC 844

HO CHI MIN 00000951 001.2 OF 003

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite considerable progress in religious freedom in the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai and genuinely supportive provincial-level authorities, implementation of Vietnam's legal framework on religion remains quite uneven at the community and village level. While the provincial chief of the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) appears quite engaged and dedicated to his task, even he acknowledges that progress on religious issues is hampered by uneven local implementation and a lack of understanding at the local level. A stop in a rural district provided insights into the lack of respect pastors sometimes face when one pastor was, in effect, held waiting for over five hours in what appears to have been an act of intimidation by local authorities prior to the pastor's meeting with ConGenoffs. Another pastor, one of the province's most outspoken and respected religious figures, spoke of the productive relations he has forged with both the provincial Committee for Religious Affairs and the Province's top political leaders while complaining that the real problem is with the uneven and even arbitrary enforcement of Vietnamese laws on religion at the local level. Religion is only one factor contributing to tensions Gia Lai, an ethnically diverse region with economic and cultural divisions. END SUMMARY.

CRA CHIEF DESCRIBES FREE MARKET FOR RELIGION

¶2. (SBU) During their August 13-15 trip to the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai, Poloff and HRS Chief met with the Chief of the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), Mr. Tran Thanh Hung, in Pleiku. Mr. Hung was open, helpful and informative. Hung said relations between the four major religious organizations in Gia Lai--Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants and Cao Dai--were close and collaborative. Hung said leaders and followers often attended each others' holiday and social gatherings. In Gia Lai, Hung said the CRA facilitates the construction of parishes, helps with the publication of bilingual bibles, and provides training on recognition and registration procedures. Mr. Hung said relations between religious groups and the local authorities were improving, but agreed isolated problems remain -- problems which he attributed to a lack of training and knowledge of the law on religion on both sides.

¶3. (SBU) Hung said of the 17 registered and official Protestant denominations in Vietnam, nine are present in Gia Lai. Hung believes the overall number of Protestants in the area is growing steadily, but affiliations tend to change depending on what a congregation has to offer. Hung said competition among Protestant house churches for followers is strong and many offer charitable assistance as a way to attract new members. When the

assistance runs out, followers move on to the next church. (Note: Hung's description exactly matches that of Pastor Tho, as reported in ref C.) Hung said this practice makes registration difficult since the law requires that each congregation reach a certain membership threshold before they can apply. Despite complications, Hung said a new church registration typically takes less than 50 days--just slightly more than the 30-day response time mandated by law. Hung said he often met with congregations to listen to their concerns and confessed his own limits in comprehending how to practically implement the legal framework at times. Hung was optimistic, however, and intent on working with all religious groups to improve mutual understanding of the law. Upon leaving, Hung provided Poloff with copies of the legal framework on religion translated into ethnic minority languages for use in training sessions.

Chu Se Chairman's Not-So-Helpful Hand

14. (SBU) In sharp contrast to the CRA chief's well-informed and open attitude, a visit to the Chairman of the Chu Se District People's Committee, Nguyen Dzung, proved quite frustrating. The hour-long meeting began well enough, with Dzung reciting a long litany of GVN goals for economic development through the promotion of agriculture and education as well as GVN efforts to help the ethnic minorities that comprise 52 percent of the district's population. Dzung said the Chu Se District People's Committee provides small loans for ethnic minority families to start businesses and also provides transportation for those attending refugee visa interviews at the U.S. Consulate General in HCMC. Turning to the issue of refugees, Dzung said he believed some who flee to Cambodia are encouraged by opportunists who want to buy ethnic minority-owned land at a low price. Dzung said the victims are told if they go to Cambodia, they will be resettled to a third country where they can live without working.

15. (SBU) When asked about Montagnard Foundation reports of Degar followers being arrested and put on trial for their Christian beliefs, Dzung launched into a fiery tirade denouncing those

HO CHI MIN 00000951 002.2 OF 003

arrested as Forces United for the Liberation of Races Oppressed (FULRO) separatists and instruments of hostile foreign forces actively trying to foment rebellion in the region. Dzung affirmed there had been several recent trials of Degar people for "political activities," but declined to provide specifics. (Note: Another ConGen contact has since corroborated that several arrests and trials took place in Gia Lai in recent months, noting that the charges brought against the Degar detainees were for political versus religious activities. Poloff will continue to try to confirm trial and sentencing details. End note.)

16. (SBU) As Poloff began to bring the meeting to a close in order to depart for the home of ethnic minority member and Baptist Pastor Dinh Van Triet, Dzung informed us that Pastor Triet was already at the People's Committee Headquarters. According to Dzung, Triet had been "invited" to the PC many hours earlier to discuss his church's registration application. Dzung added that local authorities had received Triet's application only in August of this year, not in December 2006 as Triet had reported to ConGen. Dzung also made a point of noting that Triet's branch of the Baptist denomination was not yet recognized by the GVN. (Note: CRA has told Hanoi that it is giving priority in registrations to those Protestant churches falling under the umbrella of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) or Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN). Protestant denominations not affiliated with the government-recognized SECV and ECVN face greater difficulties with legalization and are more likely to be subject to local-level harassment. End note.)

17. (SBU) When ConGenoffs met Pastor Triet, he had been waiting in a small meeting room for five hours and was surrounded by several officials who claimed to work for the district External Relations Office. Several more officials, including a

cameraman, filed in after we entered the room. The head of the District Committee for Religious Affairs then began haranguing Pastor Triet for having told ConGen that his church registration had been filed in December 2006 versus August 2007.

18. (SBU) Poloff asked all but the three ERO officials who had traveled with ConGen team to Chu Se to leave, including the cameraman, citing our original request for a private meeting without press. By the time the officials left, Triet was clearly uncomfortable and the ensuing conversation was superficial and stilted. Triet told Poloff he converted from the Protestant United Mission Church to follow his brother, who is also a Baptist preacher. Triet said his congregation is made up of 27 followers who hold meetings freely at his home, but are not yet registered. He said he hoped the GVN would help them with "the people who don't understand their religion" and said the 2004 passage of the legal framework on religion showed the GVN is trying to "improve their religious lives." After twenty minutes, ConGenoffs thanked Pastor Triet for his patience and encouraged him to keep ConGen posted on efforts to register his church.

SECV PASTOR SIU Y KIM PROVIDES MORE BALANCED VIEW

19. (SBU) On August 15, ConGenoffs met with Pastor Siu Y Kim of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), officially recognized by the GVN in 2001. A native of Pleiku city and member of the Jarai minority group, Pastor Kim was able to discuss not only the general state of religious freedom in Gia Lai but also the many socio-economic factors that impact GVN-ethnic minority relations in the province. While Pastor Kim said cooperation between local authorities and SECV congregations has improved since 2001, church activities are still closely monitored by authorities, albeit in a more cordial way. Kim believes formulation of GVN religious policy at the national level to be appropriate, but implementation at the local level remains lacking. While Pastor Kim provided us with many examples of his run-ins with local officials, nearly all of them ended with Kim prevailing. Kim noted that particularly in the past few years, both the Chairman of the provincial CRA and the Chairman of the People's Committee for the Gia Lai province have played very helpful roles in pressuring local officials to respect Pastor Kim's rights and those of his followers. One particularly notable incident involved a rural plainclothes police officer who disrupted a church service by walking in and snapping photos of the participants. After considerable effort and complaining to regional officials, Pastor Kim obtained an apology and the offending police officer was transferred to another locality.

110. (SBU) Pastor Kim's experience with official registration of his congregations ran the gamut. The fastest permit he received was issued in 2 months while one application filed two years ago

HO CHI MIN 00000951 003.2 OF 003

was yet to be processed. The SECV in Gai Lai has 87 new meeting houses at various stages of ground breaking, construction and completion. Of those 87 meeting houses, only six have received permits. Pastor Kim acknowledged that building new churches was in many ways no different than building any other building in rural areas where most construction is done without permits. The problem at first, however, was that while local authorities turn a blind eye to most unauthorized construction some officials were attempting to block church construction. After considerable effort and the direct involvement to top provincial officials, Pastor Kim is almost always able to convince authorities to allow construction to proceed without formal building approvals in place.

111. (SBU) Pastor Kim believes local officials' prejudice towards ethnic minorities is also a contributing factor in continuing delicate Protestant-GVN relations in Gia Lai. Kim said ethnic minorities need to be more active and vocal about economic development needs in their communities, while the GVN needs to provide more culturally appropriate and effective assistance. Pastor Kim cited rubber plantations as a hot issue in Gia Lai at

the moment. Kim said ethnic minority farmers are often hired by rubber companies to clear the land and plant the rubber trees but are then dismissed because they lack the skills needed to cultivate the trees and harvest the rubber. Instead, the companies recruit "northerners" to work on the plantations, increasing ethnic tensions in the region. (Note: This was also reported by a hamlet chief in Ref A. End note.)

¶12. (SBU) One particularly sad and divisive incident involved a youth engaged in the common practice of gleaning waste rubber left on the ground after regular harvesting. A few weeks prior to our visit, a plantation caretaker killed a 13 year-old ethnic minority child with a machete after he suspected the child of "stealing rubber." The caretaker was arrested and the company offered the family compensation. The family was incensed, refused to take the money, and demanded restitution in land instead. The company has thus far refused.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) Meetings with district and provincial GVN officials, ethnic minorities and religious leaders in Gia Lai reflected the comments made by house church pastors in Ho Chi Minh City (ref D) -- while overall conditions for religious freedom are improving in Vietnam, difficulties remain, especially in remote areas where local officials have little knowledge of the bureaucratic framework on religion. Tensions between ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic minority communities, especially in terms of economic development priorities, are a significant contributing factor. End comment.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
FAIRFAX